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ABSTRACT

In its current adoptions of reading series for the elementary grades, California has chosen literature-based programs rather than the more traditional basal readers. A study investigated whether the contents of such readers for grades K-3 truly consist solely of literary selections, since it is well-recognized that quality books carry heavy vocabulary loads far beyond those of beginning students. It was hypothesized that the series approved for the lower grades would contain chiefly so-called interesting storybook materials and not children's literature. The tables of contents of 40 kindergarten-primary books in the 1989 editions of 5 major reading series were examined. A point scale was devised in which points were given when the author's or author-illustrator's name; the title of the story, poem, or article; or the series it was part of was mentioned as exemplary in any of four books on children's literature (by Bernice Cullinan, Joan Glazer, John Stewig, and Zena Sutherland, authorities in the field). Results confirmed the hypothesis: only 17.4% to 29.5% of the total contents (depending on the particular series) was rated as literature using this approach. In other words, these beginning reading books can be described as a collection of engaging but undistinguished printed matter. (Four figures and seven tables of data are included. (Author/SR)

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Literature-Based Reading Series for Grades K-3:

Are They Truly Literature?[1]

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1. A shortened version of the paper presented at the conference of the Washington Organization for Reading Development (W.O.R.D.), Tacoma, March 1992.

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ABSTRACT

In its current adoptions of reading series for the elementary grades, California has chosen literature-based programs rather than the more traditional basal readers. During Fall 1990, therefore, the researcher's concern was to determine if the contents of such readers for Grades K-3 can truly consist solely of literary selections since it is well-recognized that quality books carry heavy vocabulary loads far beyond those of beginning students. It was hypothesized that the series approved for the lower grades would contain chiefly so-called interesting storybook materials and not children's literature. An examination of 40 kindergarten-primary books in the 1989 editions of five major reading series confirmed the hypothesis: Only 17.4% to 29.5% of the total contents (depending on the particular series) was rated as literature by authorities Bernice Cullinan, Joan Glazer, John Stewig, and Zena Sutherland. In other words, these beginning reading books can be truthfully described as a collection of engaging but undistinguished printed matter.

LITERATURE-BASED READING STORIES FOR GRADES K-3: ARE THEY TRULY LITERATURE?

On numerous occasions children's literature has been described as comprising books that (1) meet high artistic and literary standards; (2) use language imaginatively; (3) implicitly stress permanence and excellence; (4) address the emotional, social and cognitive developmental levels of their readers; (5) give those readers pleasure and help them understand themselves and others; and (6) honestly and accurately portray them as girls and boys and not expect them to make associations or perform mental processes of which they are not capable.

The current California English-Language Arts Framework calls for "A literature-based program that encourages reading and exposes all students, including those whose primary language is not English, to significant literary works." Consequently, when in the fall of 1989 the state began implementing that program with even beginning readers, the researcher became concerned about such an experimental approach because children's trade books (which are considered to be literature) carry a heavy vocabulary load far beyond that of young girls and boys. Furthermore, there is also a matter of concept development that may vary greatly among school beginners.

Subsequently, in 1990, the researcher applied for a small grant to determine whether or not the contents of five nationally recognized reading series -- all published in 1989 and all adopted by the state of California -- truly constitute children's literature for grades K-3 or whether the series approved for the lower grades contain chiefly so-called interesting storybook materials. A total of 40 books (with 977 selections) was involved, ranging from preprimers through third readers, second half, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

FIVE LITERATURE BASED READING SERIES (1989)

READING SERIES A
Preprimer 1
Preprimer 2
Preprimer 3
Primer
First Grade
Second Grade, 1
Second Grade, 2
Third Grade, 1
Third Grade, 2

Total: 208 Selections

READING SERIES B
Preprimer 1
Preprimer 2
Preprimer 3
Primer
First Reader
Second Reader, 1
Second Reader, 2
Third Reader, 1
Third Reader, 2

Total: 206 Selections

READING SERIES C
Book A
Book B
Book C
Grade 1
Grade 2
Grade 3

Total: 100 Selections

READING SERIES D
Preprimer
Primer
First Grade
Second Grade, 1
Second Grade, 2
Third Grade, 1
Third Grade, 2

Total: 273 Selections

READING SERIES E
Preprimer 1
Preprimer 2
Preprimer 3
Primer
Book 1
Book 2, 1
Book 2, 2
Book 3, 1
Book 3, 2

Total: 190 Selections

GRAND TOTAL: 40 BOOKS -- 977 Selections

METHOD

Reference Base

First, four popular authorities in the field of children's literature were chosen as a reference base for determining whether an author or title was exemplary:

Cullinan, B. Literature and the Child. Second edition (Harcourt, 1989).

Glazer, J. Literature for Young Children. Second edition (Merrill, 1986).

Stewig, J. Children and Literature. Second edition (Houghton, 1988).

Sutherland, Z. & Arbuthnot, M. Children and Books. Seventh edition (Scott, Foresman, 1986).

Point Scale

Then, in order to provide the broadest possible opportunity for the contents of those 40 books to be rated as literature, a simple point scale was developed:

1 point . . .for the name of the author or author-illustrator

1 point . . .for the title of the story, poem, or article

.5 point . . .for each selection that was part of a series

The maximum possible was a rating of 2.5 per reference for a total of 10 points.

The scale was readily implemented. For example, if the author were mentioned but not that chosen story, poem, or article, the selection would rate 1

point. If the entry -- and it would likely be a folk tale or a fable -- were listed but not that designated author, it would again rate 1 point only. Two points, however, would be given when both author and title were mentioned. For instance, in Series A, Third Reader, Two,Cooney's Miss Rumphius earned a total of 7 points with three references listing both author and story, and the fourth listing the author but not that particular story.

Finally, if the selection in the reader were part of a well-known series, an additional .5 point would be given. In Series B, Third Reader, Two, for example, a portion of Cleary's Ramona Quimby, Age 8 earned 6.5 points: two references listed both story and author for a total of 5 points; one reference ignored Cleary completely for a score of 0; and the fourth mentioned Cleary and the Ramona series but not that particular selection for a total of 1.5 points.

Procedure

The tables of contents of all 40 books for grades K-3 for the five reading series (designated as literature-based Series A through E) were examined. Every author or author-illustrator's name and every selection title were individually checked against each of the four references.

RESULTS

An examination of the 977 selections and their authors or author-illustrators revealed the findings shown in Tables 1 - 5 by individual series. Table 6 provides a summary of the maximum literary content found in the early levels of five nationally recognized reading series.

TABLE 1 -- READING SERIES A (9 BOOKS)

LEVEL	SCORE	POINTS POSSIBLE	PERCENTAGE
Preprimer 1	9	84	10.7
Preprimer 2	14	80	17.5
Preprimer 3	13	62	21.0
Primer	15	168	8.9
First Grade	31	196	15.8
Second Grade, 1	54	288	18.8
Second Grade, 2	62.5	268	23.3
Third Grade, 1	48	256	18.8
Third Grade, 2	44	268	16.4
T O T A L	290.5	1670	17.4

TABLE 2 -- READING SERIES B (9 BOOKS)

LEVEL	SCORE	POINTS POSSIBLE	PERCENTAGE
Preprimer 1	11	88	12.5
Preprimer 2	29	77	37.7
Preprimer 3	41	128	32.0
Primer	33	192	17.2
First Reader	36	192	18.8
Second Reader, 1	61.5	228	27.0
Second Reader, 2	45.5	240	19.0
Third Reader, 1	45	280	16.1
Third Reader, 2	54.5	288	18.9
T O T A L	356.5	1709	20.9

TABLE 3 -- READING SERIES C (6 BOOKS)

LEVEL	SCORE	POINTS POSSIBLE	PERCENTAGE
Book A	21	56	37.5
Book B	22	60	36.7
Book C	12	56	21.4
Grade 1	63	208	30.3
Grade 2	65	224	29.0
Grade 3	72	260	27.7
T O T A L	255	864	29.5

TABLE 4 -- READING SERIES D (7 BOOKS)

LEVEL	SCORE	POINTS POSSIBLE	PERCENTAGE
Preprimer	0	168	0
Primer	61	232	26.3
First Grade	78	264	29.5
Second Grade, 1	130	448	29.0
Second Grade, 2	72	392	18.4
Third Grade, 1	118	400	29.5
Third Grade, 2	82.5	416	19.3
T O T A L	541.5	2320	23.3

TABLE 5 -- READING SERIES E (9 BOOKS)

LEVEL	SCORE	POINTS POSSIBLE	PERCENTAGE
Preprimer 1	1	88	1.1
Preprimer 2	3	80	3.8
Preprimer 3	4	88	4.5
Primer	31	180	17.2
Book 1	21	176	11.9
Book 2,1	53	244	21.7
Book 2,2	34	224	15.2
Book 3,1	69	256	27.0
Book 3,2	58.5	200	29.3
T O T A L	274.5	1536	17.9

TABLE 6 -- MAXIMUM LITERATURE CONTENT OF FIVE MAJOR READING SERIES (1989)

LEVEL	SERIES A	SERIES B	SERIES C	SERIES D	SERIES E
Preprimer 1	10.7%	12.5%	A 37.5%	0 %	1.1%
Preprimer 2	17.5%	37.7%	B 36.7%	N/P	3.8%
Preprimer 3	21.0%	32.0%	C 21.4%	N/P	4.5%
Primer	8.9%	17.2%	-	26.3%	17.2%
Grade One	15.8%	18.8%	30.3%	29.5%	11.9%
Grade Two,1	18.8%	27.0%	29.0%	29.0%	21.7%
Grade Two,2	23.3%	19.0%	N/P	18.4%	15.2%
Grade Three,1	18.8%	16.1%	27.7%	29.5%	27.0%
Grade Three,2	16.4%	18.9%	N/P	19.3%	29.3%
TOTAL	17.4%	20.9%	29.5%	23.3%	17.9%

N/P = Not Published

CONCLUSION

The researcher's concern about the validity of claims regarding literary content of five literature-based reading series for grades K-3 was justified. Only 17.4% to 29.5% of the total contents (depending upon the particular series), as shown in Figure 2, was rated as literature by four recognized authorities in the area of children's literature -- and these figures were based on a remarkably liberal scale. Had more rigid standards been established, the percentages would obviously have been even lower.

In the hope that literary content would increase as the young readers progressed through the series, comparisons were charted to determine if such content did grow between the books designated as preprimers and those listed as third readers, two. Figures 3 and 4 show that four of the series did increase in literary content as the children became more capable readers.

FIGURE 2

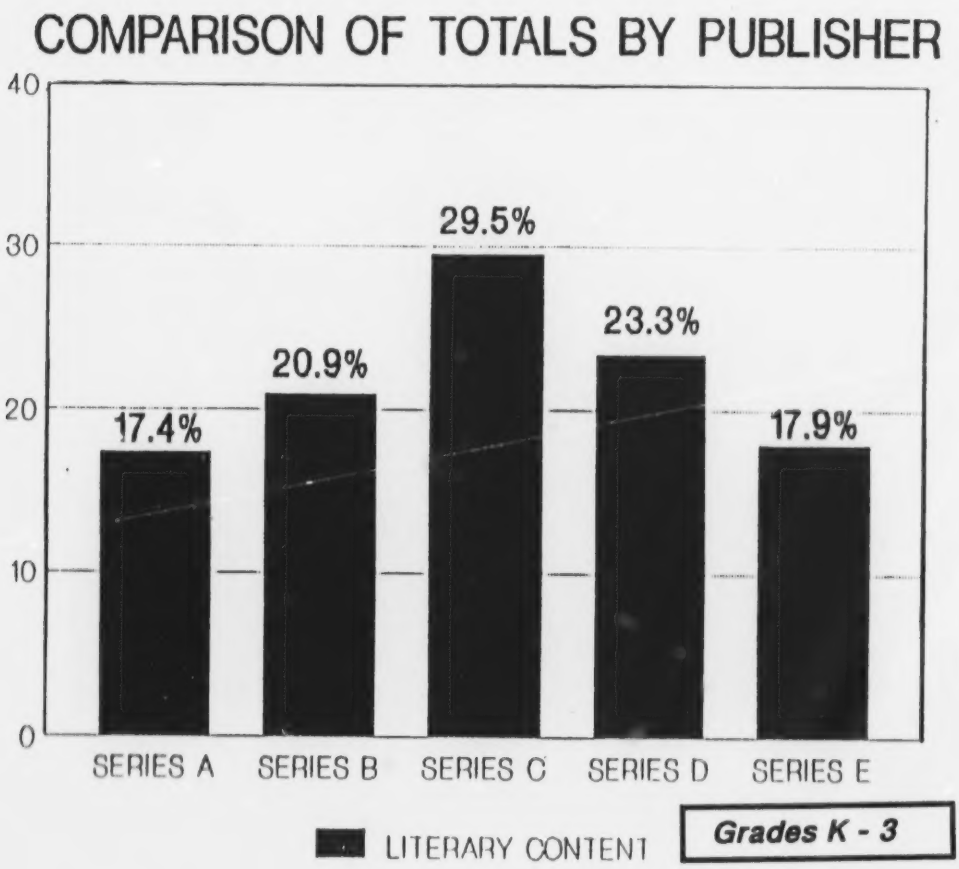

COMPARISON OF TOTALS BY PUBLISHER
40
30
20
10
0
17.4%
20.9%
29.5%
23.3%
17.9%
SERIES A
SERIES B
SERIES C
SERIES D
SERIES E
LITERARY CONTENT
Grades K - 3

FIGURE 3

COMPARISON OF PREPRIMERS BY PUBLISHER

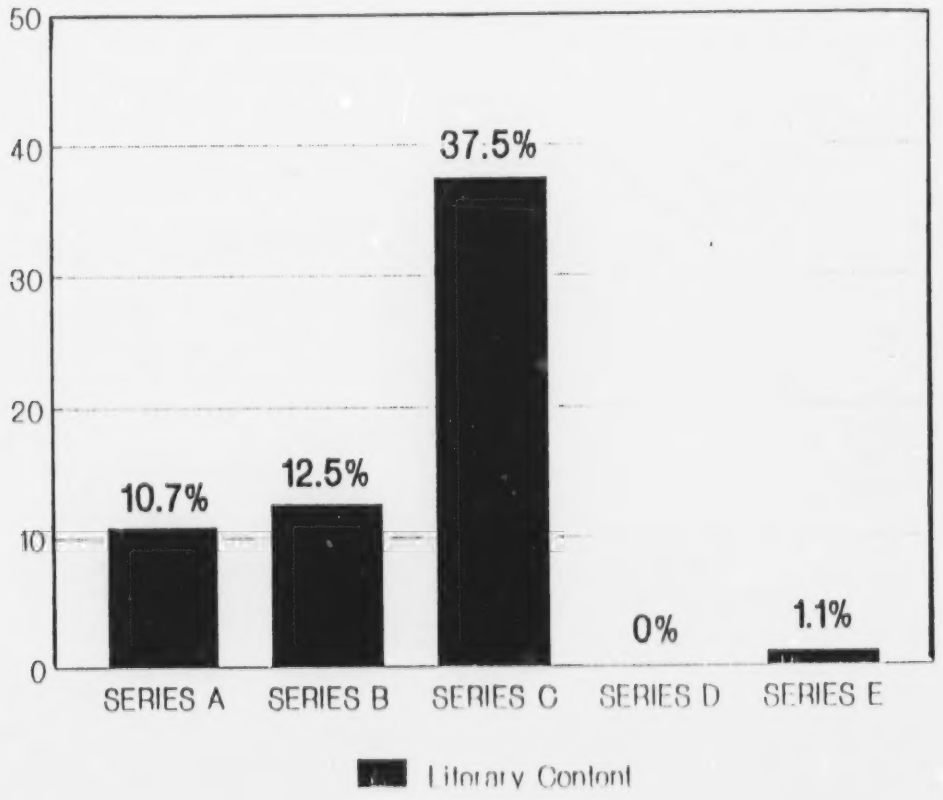
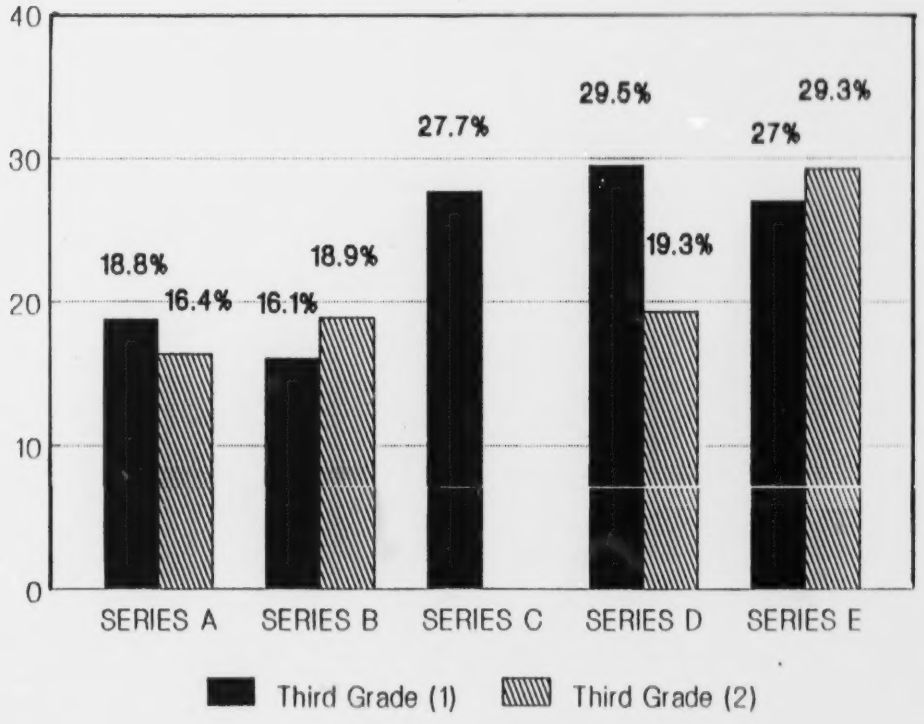


FIGURE 4

Comparison of 3rd Gr. Readers
By Publishers



DISCUSSION

The results raised several issues -- directly or indirectly -- regarding the use of literature-based reading series in the early grades:

1. *Can such programs be described accurately as literature-based?* At best, less than 30% of the contents -- even with the most generous interpretation of the term "literature" -- was rated as literary for grades K-3.

2. *Should teachers uphold the integrity of published materials as written by the author(s)?* In May 1988 the International Reading Association joined the National Council of Teachers of English in its resolution to recommend that if publishers abridge or alter, in any way, significant works of literature for use in textbooks, they plainly state that such alterations did occur as well as the nature and extent of the abridgment. The resolution went on to emphasize that abridgment and adaptation may even constitute censorship in some cases.

All five publishers whose series were examined did adapt and/or abridge some of the contents of their series (particularly in the second and third readers), as shown in Table 7; and stated as much in the early pages of the individual books. The texts of all preprimers and some primers were left intact.

TABLE 7 -- NUMBER OF ABRIDGMENTS AND/OR ADAPTATIONS AS STATED BY FIVE SERIES' PUBLISHERS FOR LEVELS PREPRIMER THROUGH THIRD READER

READING SERIES	PREPRIMER	PRIMER	1ST RD.	2ND RD.	3RD RD.	TOTAL
Series A	0	3	10	21	27	61
Series B	0	4	1	20	9	34
Series C	0	0	3	4	2	9
Series D	0	0	1	14	16	31
Series E	0	3	3	15	16	37

3. *How do such series teach phonics skills when and if the stories, poems or articles are presented by inexperienced or inefficient teachers?* The Commission on Reading stated in its 1985 report Becoming a Nation of Readers that teachers of beginning reading should present well-designed phonics instruction and that such instruction be completed by the end of the second grade for most children. Marilyn Adams in her 1990 book Beginning to Read stressed that "programs for all children, good and poor readers alike, should strive to maintain an appropriate balance between phonics activities and the reading and appreciation of informative and engaging texts."

4. *What effect will restrictive school budgets have on the purchase of consumable supplementary materials which some such programs demand?* Series C, for instance, lists one paperback for each of its preprimers and then raises the requirement gradually until there are eight paperbacks needed for each of its second and third readers.

5. *Do literature-based programs diminish or increase parent involvement in the reading efforts of their children?* We are all well aware of the importance of the role of parents in the education of their daughters and sons, especially in the early grades. Research studies have repeatedly confirmed this fact.

6. *What effect will the implementation of literature-based series have on scores the young students attain on mandated standardized reading tests?* In the public relations arena this may well be the most significant issue raised because in many parts of the country such scores are currently deemed public information and widely disseminated.